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Twenty-Four-Hour Woman

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Film
Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by
Mawiyah Kai EL-Jamah Bomani
B.A. Southern University at New Orleans, 1995

December, 2008

MoDupe
Nadir Lasana Bomani
for supporting my dreams

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	v
PREFACE	
My Block, My Street, My Peeps	1
Sweet Black Pussy for Sale	6
Salvation	7
Vodoun	8
A Memorial for Lawrence	9
Classifieds	13
Apartment 12B Dwight D. Eisenhower Street	14
Cribs	23
Tam Nguyen: An Immigrant Woman's Recollections	25
Blues	33
Vita	34

ABSTRACT

“Sweet Black Pussy for Sale” sets the stage for this very feminine and colloquial laced collection of verse. Both figuratively and literally, the voices of a seldom-traveled African-American culture are depicted through these songs. In this thesis, I consider myself a GRIOT, sworn to tell nothing but the truth.

These poems speak from places some might consider sacred and others quite sinful. These poems moan out the anthems of those unsung heroes and heroines from my family lineage. The voices of my long dead grandfather, grandmother, aunts and great uncle haunt poems such as “Blues,” “Salvation,” “A Memorial for Lawrence,” and “Apartment 12 B Dwight D. Eisenhower Street.”

These poems say, “Even when it’s sunny on the other side of town somebody could be wearing a frown. It’s because the blues don’t mess with folks who ain’t got anything to lose.”

PREFACE

My Block, My Street, My Peeps

*There had to be an understanding that NOW
the address must be to blacks; that shrieking
into the steady and organized deafness of
the white ear was perilously innocent; was
“no count.”*

~Gwendolyn Brooks

This is my street. You will embark on a journey through shotgun homes. You will meet a few of my neighbors. Open your eyes; pay attention to the people. Watch and witness the happenings on street corners and stoops. A woman's story waits behind each address. A woman, in one abode, yearns to make love. She is ready and willing. She is void of taboos. If you are nice, two doors down, a woman will slip you the recipe to keep your man at home. In another's hair are African secrets. These secrets have traveled from slave ships to cotton fields. This woman has evolved into an Oya archetype. She is a goddess of change. The sassy woman, returning from her husband's funeral, is packaged in the outerwear of success. In honor of freeloaders she has prepared the inevitable "bullshit feast." Her game face is on. These divas can silence impotent men. These divas speak in Standard English and can articulate their pleasure zones. They have earned the right to advertise via sensual discourse.

Nevertheless, there are also women staggering through the flip side of life. These women wear the scars of false hope. These women now dedicate themselves to neighborhood escapism. Some of these women will tell you, off the record, “Crack took the love out of black families.” These women fearlessly look the sins of men in the eyes. Yet, they blame “girls” for growing up and out fast. They blame “girls” for acting like women. They give men a pass. Men, in the eyes of these women, have an inherent need to stick their “thangs” (every fifteen minutes) somewhere moist. These women’s opinions might surprise you.

There are also, among these women, entrepreneurs. These women own stores of separatism. These explorers came in search of the AMERICAN DREAM. They borrowed a page from AMERICAN HISTORY and oppress as a means of remaining culturally pure.

You will find, as you exit, a lonely blue house. The occupant’s favorite color is blue. There are blue shutters, blue sheets and an empty blue pocketbook on the bureau. This woman is the most contented of all.

I can only defend these women now. I want to give them voice and yet try not to judge them. I listen, I laugh, I cry, and I rejoice with them. These poems are snippets into their lives. No, I do not mean to say these poems will not survive the ruins of time. I just feel that today my passion lies in the defense of trials and tribulations haunting my psyche at present.

Tomorrow, I might come to see the world differently; I may travel an opposite street. I may get up the nerve to introduce you to others. For now, these poems have assembled themselves. They have spoken through my ancestral altar and offered “Eyife” (a definite yes) for their uniformity. These poems capture brief images of bluesy people. They capture my ritualized travels through New Orleans.

In recent years, while I have been composing these portraits and monologues, the University of New Orleans has easily guided my voice down this blues path. I am immensely thankful to the CWW Instructors who coddled me during my tenure. I was encouraged to “say what I meant” and “mean what I said.”

Two specific poems included in my thesis that I feel represent the ideology of individually imbedded within New Orleans women are “Salvation” and “A Memorial for Lawrence.” The poem “Salvation” pays tribute to a woman’s refusal to lose her man to a young neophyte’s charm. The vixen is a woman barely crawling through the intricacies of vodoun. Yet, she will find, not every woman scorned will suffer under her covers:

so i reckon you’ll be wantin your last supper
shrimp creole my treat
seasoned in a broth of menstrual flow
whilst yo heart simmers
pastor fae say one swallow of red rain will put a lover’s charm to shame
by mornin you’ll see lucretia in my eyes and realize
i’m the only woman

worth
 runnin
 to

In the work “A Memorial for Lawrence” we have the widow Elouise who has loved hard. In a times of grief she assumes a staunch “Don’t start none, won’t be none” sassiness. For her, it is never a question of whether she loved Lawrence. She loved him wholeheartedly and expressed it in her decision to take his ashes on a holiday:

i saw my friend’s smile widen
we held hands and sobbed
tears of redemption
after the last uninvited guest departed the premises
me and ela dranked two pots of coffee
and danced to bob marley’s guava jelly fourteen times
by the next morning we were goddesses
flying among the heavens
in search of peace and solace...

The prominent women of “Salvation” and “A Memorial for Lawrence” represent the hallmark of “feminine” survival. In “Salvation” you have a woman refusing to accept a defeatist attitude. She will out-hex the “other woman.” She will use every trick in the book to keep her man glued to her hips. In the poem, “A Memorial for Lawrence,” Elouise is a woman coping with the death of her husband. She is a woman surviving a community of instigators. She has a steel tongue that is ready to defend her focused attitude. Both women are divaesque warriors wielding a sword and a mirror. They are women adept at turning any negative into a sweet reward. They are women who will never let the block see them sweat.

These poems were written as monologues because these women demanded a monologue’s freedom. They need you to accept their reality unfiltered. In order to understand these women, listeners must sit and meditate on the tales offered from their lips.

Only dramatic monologues could invoke their spirit with such intensity and passion.

The poet Ai has often said that the first person voice is the strongest poetic voice to use. It was during experimentation with this voice that Ai first fell in love with dramatic monologues. It was such a passionate love that no human concept of emotional or physical love could compare.

I also fell in love with monologues after writing the poem “Salvation.” Through dramatic monologues, I am able to divulge my character’s moral thought processes. I am swept into the character’s realm of realism. I set sail across uncharted waters. I wait for the sound of unfamiliar voices and let my pen do what it must. I savor the journeys to come.

At this point, in my writing career, I thank my UNO family but most importantly John Gery, Bill Lavender, and Kay Murphy. I thank them for giving this poet purpose. From this MFA period on, my subject matter will pay homage to my culture. I am a writer. May my ancestors be pleased. May this circle never be broken.

Sweet Black Pussy for Sale

Aged	33 years
Mileage	4 lovers 2 of which were by-products of a ménage à trois 958 oral fixations 3000 wet dreams and counting 10,000 vibratordildobenwaball sensations
Color	exterior: black hair with a mingle of gray (up close the salt-and-pepper effect makes the pussy appear distinguished) 2 ingrown hairs left labia majora interior: salmon Seeking monogamous robust penis or cunnilingus extraordinaire

Salvation

you think i don't know
what lucretia doin to us
with her grinnin eyes
lyin through her gap-tooth sighs
got you wanderin round
with a flashlight at daybreak
neighbors whisperin
she got roots on you
sayin she ridin your soul outta control
with those wide hips

you think i don't know
under our bed there are
three packed suitcases
an envelope with nine hundred dollars
a one-way train ticket to the crossroads
and a brown paper bag concealin a fifth of gin
you ain't nothin but a man on the verge of sin

you think i don't know
where this is headed
ain't nothin left to take back
ain't nothin left to pack
i ain't got no more tricks up my sleeve
or beneath my skirt
so i reckon you'll be wantin your last supper
shrimp creole my treat
seasoned in a broth of menstrual flow
 whilst yo heart simmers
pastor fae say one swallow of red rain will put a lover's charm to shame
by mornin you'll see lucretia in my eyes and realize
i'm the only woman

worth
runnin
to

Vodoun

Beware a black woman's hair,
Such ancient secrets buried there

A Memorial for Lawrence

when lawrence died
elouise braxton sunk herself
into the recliner by the window
elouise an always gracious figure
wore a black pantsuit that hugged her figure
tighter than bergman and bogart's embrace
during the last seconds of casablanca
which coincidentally is the final memory
i have of thursday night movie fest
a weekly event i had shared with elouise and lawrence
for the past eight years

now i stood at the entrance to the kitchen
watching elouise gaze
past the congregation
storming up her driveway
and through an open door
masquerading their stomach's acidic distress
as each prepared to recite
eloquently memorized words of condolence
in exchange for food and drinks
without a word
elouise politely pointed them to the kitchen
where i had taken a turkey from the oven
and replaced it with barbecue cornish hens
i watched elouise rise
like a high note from minni rippleton
and pace the floor
smiling every now and then
when handed a sympathy card

i watched lawrence's two daughters
from his previous marriage
ask elouise what were her plans
for their daddy's restaurant
now that he was gone
elouise rolling her eyes
while sipping a concoction of vodka
and lemonade and pointing them
in the direction of the kitchen
as the youngest one sighed
and under her breath mumbled
"she probably gon sell it
and give the money to a much younger man"

elouise jerked the young instigator by her arm
and when i heard a neighbor yell for mrs. elouise to calm down
i stepped from the kitchen to the door way
i moved no further than that elouise was known to swim with ease
through her own sticky situations
when i saw the girl's arm in ela's hand i was sure
the stitching in the sleeve
of the young woman's dress
had suffered a slight but unnoticeable tear
it had to
under elouise's grip
elouise stared at her in the eyes and told her
"baby you ain't woman enough
to tangle with me
now your daddy dead but i ain't
so if you keep talkin like you talkin
you gon find yourself with a fist
in between your teeth
ain't nobody
and i mean nobody
do you hear
gon disrespect me
in my own house
now go feed your face"
elouise adjusted the young woman's dress
and told her how pretty she looked in fuscia
and the young woman walked away
tottering on her very high heels

the young woman's older sister whispered
"girl you gotta be careful with crazy people
cause they will snap on you in a second"
elouise grinned walked over to the mantel
and ran her fingers across the curve
of the sterling silver picture frame
holding steady the picture
of her and lawrence on their wedding day
as she called to me to look with her
"lynette remember you took this picture
girl it seems like we just married
like we just moved into this house
it ain't right i'm ten yrs older
why didn't i have the heart attack
why'd it have to be lawrence
he was fifty-eight-years old lyn it ain't right"
i excused myself from elouise
i wiped my hands on my apron
and slipped into elouise's bedroom to find my purse
to take my last glucatrol tablet
worrying about elouise
made me absent-minded
of my own life threatening illness

when i returned ela had walked
 away from the mantel and back to the window
 "you see that freshly mowed lawn lyn"
 "yeah i see it "
 i gurgled between gulps of cranberry juice
 and the after taste of chewed medicine
 "we were gon plant tulips out there me and lawrence
 we even talked about sectioning off
 a spot for a garden with tomatoes cucumbers radishes
 lawrence loved the shit out of cucumbers
 you know" ela whispered
 "we never went on a honeymoon "
 "what you say"
 i screamed trying to look surprised
 i had heard ela tell this story so many times
 but i didn't mind
 so when she said we made plans
 to go this summer i smiled
 so now she said in her sassy ela tongue
 "i got two first class plane tickets to jamaica
 and i'm one person short
 i wonder what lawrence would do
 if it were the other way around"
 "i bet he'd go" i had stumbled upon the words
 like a drunken fool while lighting a cigarette
 retrieved from my apron
 elouise laughed making conversation with her self
 "he probably would go lyn
 say lynette don't you have some
 vacation time coming up"
 "yeah" i hesitated wondering if elouise was hysterical
 all the while trying to run from her wounds
 "well you wanna go to jamaica just us girls"
 "ela you sure you up to it"
 i retorted as if her timing was impulsively weird
 which it was
 "lynnette i need some time away from this house
 from these people
 and i've decided to sprinkle lawrence's ashes
 along the beach or in the ocean"
 ela giggled "just as soon
 as i can get these
 hungry ass mutha fuckas
 out my house ima pack"

 dragging out the sensation
 buying time for my mind
 to catch up with my vocal cords
 i threw in the reverend wilkins clause
 my last loophole
 what about rev wilkins counseling session
 "if you go you gon miss that"
 "girl please rev wilkins ain't gon tell me how to grieve"
 elouisa laughed cautiously between words

i'm doing just fine
i asked ela if she wanted a cup of coffee
we sat down
me on the sofa
and she in lawrence's chair
where we talked for hours
as guests stacked plates up to their chins
looking every bit as sorry for ela's loss but eager to feast
on home cooking that didn't leave a sink full of loitering dishes
bleeding over onto their own kitchen counters
through it all ela and i talked
about how much she loved lawrence
and about how she wanted him to experience jamaica
since it was all they had talked about for the longest
she laughed briefly when she wondered
how their adopted son lawrence jr.
the same young man who had
taken it upon his manly shoulders to arrange the funeral
how would the dutiful lawrence jr. take to the news
of her hopping a plane to some exotic resort
the morning after his fathers funeral
but she decided it was best
to leave him a letter in his room
i told her lawrence's daughters would be furious
she looked at me with her half smile
and said "they is lawrence's kin
my blood don't pour through them conceited ass veins"
and for a moment i'd forgotten
about lawrence's death
i saw my friend's smile widen
we held hands and sobbed
tears of redemption

and after the last uninvited guest departed the premises
me and ela dranked two pots of coffee
and danced to bob marley's guava jelly fourteen times
by the next morning we were goddesses
ready and willing to take flight among the heavens
in search of peace and solace

Classifieds

I gots a job opening
for a lover
I feel the need
to advertise

I gots a job opening
for a lover
brothers please only apply

experience
a plus
know-how
a must

twenty-four-hour woman
seeking
twenty-four-hour man

so to all you ten-minute brothers
keep yo stuff in yo pants

Apartment 12 B Dwight D. Eisenhower Street

1

folks was running
in and out sylvia's apartment
i'll tell you fancy boy
like i told the last reporter
that came knocked on my door see
cause of what happened
i'm still not the woman i use to be
death and neglect
right here on poor eisenhower street
now you wandering round mr. newsman
in search of the same story
here you is waking my chow chow matlock up
you shoulda been round that week
when so much racket was going on
made me lose track of who
was over bidding who on bob barker
white girl thought just cause her sweat-shirt say U C L A
she would know how to out-bet a retired garbage collector
shoot! that half dead black man said forty thousand
and she said something crazy like eighty five thousand
and you shoulda seen what they was bidding on
five trips to countries
i can't even begin to name
or better yet spell
oh! they also had a cypress high-bar
a mahogany eight piece dining set
and a big screen color tv
to make a long story short
the garbage collector found out
he ain't need no confused alphabets on his chest
to take home two showcases ha! ha!
see before sylvia's unfortunate happenings
shoot! me and bob
would never lose sight of each other
use to be when i'd go to the doctor's office
it'd be me and bob barker
sometimes i couldn't even hear
when the receptionist was calling my name
"mrs. wanda harrison," she'd smile
while exhaling hard into the palm of her hand
that receptionist always putting on
she'd try and behave like calling me
all them times didn't worry
the "you know what" outta her
huh! huh! and me at the grocery store prior to this atrocity
why that was even worse
honey i'd push bob around on my portable tv
the same television my son bought me

honey my grocery cart
would be screeching aisle to aisle
of course nothing's going in or out but air
ain't that something
i done lost my thoughts

now what was i suppose to be going on about
oh yeah sylvia that young woman from across the street
well when i see channels 4, 6, and 8
parked out front my door
i had to catch the goings-on
well i am eisenhower street's neighborhood watch block captain
and shoot! don't nothing big ever happen to us retired folks
i tell you since they built them fake ass "condominiums"
as them shift-eyed white contractors call them
excuse my french and moved all those
don't want nothing out of life people in by here
we been getting some criminal looking misfits all over
and don't get me wrong even though most of them
are victims of the projects closing down gentrification
ain't that the term for it

and before you print any of this listen up
i know better than anybody since my best friend
was born and raised in the projects
not all people who live in the projects
are torn down and dilapidated like folks think
besides i done seen white folks living bad
as bad and sometimes worse off than black folks
and don't nobody degrade them
cause they live in government subsidized housing
they get food stamps and free health care too
they shopping at payless and gators and proud of it

now ain't that something
i done lost my thoughts again
we is suppose to be talking about sylvia
like i was saying before
newspaper people were poking around like
a pulitzer prize was buried somewhere beneath all
that rubble better known as sylvia's home
newsmen were like addicts fighting to get in
hoping to see anything dead or bloodied
what i saw from the police wasn't no better
kojack wanna-be's
social workers pretending to be mother theresa
and all sylvia's relatives traveling
from god knows where to weep
everybody always says
they don't want their fifteen minutes of fame
but given the chance
we'll just bout kill each other to be noticed
by somebody other than
the mama who brung us in this world

them people performed carrying on wailing fainting
and wouldn't you know it
two ambulance companies had to scrounge up
all them busybodies with their broadway theatrics

i used to see sylvia's boys
riding their bikes up and down the street
and their sister barely walking
sitting in her swing rocking back and forth
while mosquitoes and flies taunted her
i'd wake mr. harrison up
after he watched his baseball game
he loves himself some barry bonds
anyhow i'd tell him
how sylvia is such a terrible mama
letting them children play out in the street all hours of the night
he'd just turn the television up
and tell me he was waiting on the nightly news
and i'd tell him "ventress as neighborhood watch captain
it is my duty to keep watch
you heard that
my job is to watch over the neighborhood and those children
they are part of this neighborhood too "
he'd laugh and say "well mrs. harrison
i ain't made not one promise to nobody
i'd be block lieutenant
so don't go delegating to yours truly
a job involving me
telling them children's mama
to put them to bed
i mind my business
and madam captain
you should mind yours"
about five minutes later he'd walk his
i'm-just-doing-this-cause-you-love-everybody's-children walk
over to ms. sylvia's house
they'd have words
she'd slam her door
ventress would come home
turn up the news
and a few seconds later sylvia would
pull that swing inside
then walk to the corner to retrieve her children
and close her door for the night
sometimes I thought
she trying to be a good mother
she just doesn't know
how to love them children right
she more than likely
didn't have no tutelage herself

few months earlier
sylvia had brought home this man
looked like a crack head to me

they'd be all out in the middle of the street
almost having sex
his hands down her tight knit pants
her hands in his boxers course you could see his ass crack
with all that sagging mess being in fashion
then her man would back sylvia up to the porch
heist her legs in the air like the street was their bedroom
ventress found the scene funny
he always had an excuse
he'd say
"them young folks
they don't have no inhibitions
sex ain't nothing but a roll in the hay"
i personally found the whole sight
downright disrespectful

one sunday sylvia come strutting
her size zero up the street
toting a grocery bag
and before her left foot hit the bottom step
that man starts out her apartment sweating
like he been jogging in the sahara desert
then he commences to shaking
and sylvia acting like they a real family asks
"what's the matter hubby"
and he turns around picks her up by the neck
starts squeezing her throat hard
sylvia's a dark skinned girl but guess what
she began turning blue
and that's when he screamed
"bitch where is my stuff
i need my stuff
where you take it"
before i could think straight
i had done run across the street
mind you still in my sunday school clothes
and slapped him upside the head with my king james version
he dropped sylvia like she a rag doll and headed for me
i yelled "ventress open the door!"
and next thing i knew my front door flung open
revealing ventress nathaniel harrison cocking his shot gun
like clint eastwood in one of them spaghetti westerns

when sylvia's man heard that sound of death
ready to march his ass home
he smiled and backed up
holding his hands in the air as if to say i surrender
when i saw sylvia smoking crack
i blamed that no good man the one i slapped with my bible
but then he left and some other man moved in
with elevated problems to take up where the first left off
only this one had a name lee mason brown
wasn't gon be no slapping upside the head
with a bible for this joker

unless the bible was made of pure lead
word was spreading that lee mason brown
had served time for manslaughter
he had gotten out cause of some attorney slip-up
anyhow they quickly became a match made in hell
the more doped up sylvia got
the more unkempt her children became
lee would beat her like he was muhammad ali
and she was sonny liston
those children were so scared of him
and they'd hide behind that oak tree
the one on the corner of eisenhower and general macarthur
they'd spy for when he was going or coming
six and seven years and even at thirteen months old those children
had more wits about them than they mama

2

when did i notice her weight loss
well to be honest
my son my only child
had a baby
my first grandchild
when you have kids
you see how pretty they can make a day
god knew what he was making when he made children
i can go on and on about that grandbaby of mine
i'm sorry you got to excuse me
my mind ain't what it use to be
i wander for no reason at all
you had inquired sometime back about her weight
to answer you about sylvia's weight loss
i never did notice the weight loss
until too late
she always kept herself
thin as a ritz cracker to begin with
and i was so full of lamont jr.
i didn't want to see nothing else

i do remember the day mrs. lula may billings
she a widowed woman lives two doors down from me
she got robbed one afternoon
i felt so bad an eighty-year-old woman robbed
by some fool who ain't know
lula may don't keep nothing in her purse
cept maybe popeyes coupons
receipts for the tax man
and an extra set of dentures the ones with her six fake golds
and one gigantic fake as-the-day-is-long diamond crucifix
i laughed hearing my friend shirley
act out lula may standing by her powder blue ford ltd
shirley say lula was sucking her gums
while shaking her head in pure disgust
and all she could whine out was "wait till that fool son of a bitch see

he broker than he was before he took my purse”
that incident was what finally woke me up
i realized i had been neglecting my post
maybe i could have save lula may’s purse
if only i had opened my eyes wider than for that baby
so instead a fussing over lamont jr. all day
i would put him to sleep and watch the block
i studied the block two weeks before i realized
those kids had stopped leaving home
not even to ride their bikes
and sylvia she was getting that free look
like a woman who ain’t got no responsibilities
i know it cause my sister owned that look for years
my sister katie would drop all seven of her children off in my lap
“go play in aunty wanda’s nice pretty living room”
that was her *take these kids so i can take a load off my shoulder* speech
all them years dealing with katie
i can spot that look in the dark
sylvia went somewhere one day
came back home about noon
hair down her back
wearing clothes that didn’t know who was wearing them
cause they woulda crawled off that body back to the mannequin
i mean she was looking fancy and happy and free
too strange for me to let it go

ventress thought it best
i make one of those
anonymous calls to child protection
but i wanted to talk to sylvia first
see if mother to mother we could have a sit down
maybe solve this together
so i just strolled all innocent and sweet
with a plate full of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies
just as the door opens
i managed to see diapers everywhere
and the smell it almost made me faint
sylvia snatched the cookies from me in record time
and lee mason brown ate about
seven of the twelve cookies as fast as he could
right in front my face then winked and said “thank you neighbor”
as sylvia tried to find holes wide enough for her big head
to wiggle every excuse imaginable
when i asked where her children were
finally she resorted to “mrs. wanda they where they at in they skin
go mind your business old wrinkled face bitch”
after her tirade i went back to my kitchen
i had to grab hold of the counter
i even had to shut off bob barker
woman’s intuition was screaming
something’s wrong
so i went and called the police

you ever smell death mr. reporter
the stench will itch your nostrils
till you ain't never the same
what took place in sylvia's house
no human being should endure
black white purple tan yellow green
with the police came
a carload of social workers
not long after them
i saw sylvia's mother uncle young sister
her daddy and his new wife lee mason's wife
and so many people i lost track
ventress was out back on the patio listening to npr
lamont jr. was reclining in his bassinet by the window
for ten minutes i watched through the window
when that red head from channel 4 News ran out sylvia's house
complaining about the stench that's when almost one event behind the other
a body bag came out on a stretcher then another and another
i ran to the yard woke ventress
and told him "my lawd those babies is dead!"
when ventress got his faculties straight
we put baby Lamont in his stroller
and walked ourselves over there

sylvia sat in a police car yawning
high as a goodyear blimp
i could see it in her foaming mouth
then hooping and hollering for lee mason brown
i overheard two policemen
after exiting sylvia's house "this ignorant ass broad
went and murdered her babies by starvation
physical mutilation
trauma to the head with blunt objects
broken bones
cigarette burns
some shit look like
somebody been trying to
iron on their backs
that's one crazy bitch"
the other cop chuckled
"what can you expect from a crack head
and where she going
she gon get just what she deserve"

ventress kept shaking his head
i couldn't help but imagine
them poor babies crying pleading for food
pleading for somebody to stop the pain
i'll tell you before them bodies came out
three male officers
big body builder looking men
tried to get away from that house
wiping their eyes balling in tears

3

i saw on the news
the children had survived
on feces roaches and rats
lee mason brown said he was innocent
he said them kids wasn't his responsibility
said children was the reason he had left wife
he was trying to get away from his own two kids
looking for their mama's attention all the time
lula may shirley ventress and i say
sylvia got a lotta susan smith in her
some say she killed to please lee mason brown
to have him believe he was the center of her world
after the last body the thirteen-month-old came out
we wanted to blame lee mason brown
for giving sylvia crack course the mother's always last to blame

social workers told us they'd be around if we needed counseling
they passed out cards asked us to schedule appointments
one male social worker said "dealing with grief alone
can become overpowering"
after all that mess i went inside and me and ventress
smoked damn near a pack of benson and hedges

well i'm feeling right tired now
and ventress is screaming "let those children go to a quiet rest
do forgive me lord"
for constantly speaking of the dead
you have what you need
looky there ventress done taped the price is right
but i just don't have the strength to hoop and holler now days
he think if i allow myself my old routine
i'll feel the old wanda
i've come to realize i can't no mo
live out them contestants lives for them
by shouting at the television screen
than i could have saved them poor babies
by putting their oversized mama
cross my lap and spanking the daylights outta her
just wasn't gon happen
sometimes in life
we win two showcases
and other times
we barely make it out alive
we spend our fortunes
listening to folks with nothing on the line
cept their need to be winners
my will to live through the tv has all but subsided
i done seen enough true to form
showcase showdown with unpleasant results
before i close my door mr. reporter
those children deserve a proper home going
they was just children who didn't have no choice

in the matter of what woman was to be their mama
make sure when you title your story
you let folks know this sylvia mess
was my greatest sin
i often wonder
why i hadn't been nosey enough
sometimes it pays to be a busy body

but my mind is wandering again
well i got drug free zone signs to hang
don't reckon they'll do much good
from what i see everybody's got one
they like toothbrushes you know what their intended
purpose is but sometimes they get overlooked
the only difference is one will give you a rotten set of teeth
the other a decayed perspective on living
well so long
and i'll be looking in tomorrow's paper
for a picture of my street
you have a blessed day now

cribs

the newspaper reports
about the r & b mega superstar
somewhere in his home
near the catskills
not the home in detroit
he shares with his wife and four children
but the home
with the four hundred thousand dollar recording studio
and the jacuzzi that waterfalls into a granite pool
the home with the gucci rug and armani linen
with the indoor nba regulation-sized basketball court
the home where he can
make love on marble tile
and scrutinize his performance
from one of his twenty-four concealed cameras
while somewhere a cd of his voice
echoing the theme from his latest concert
in calgary provides the soundtrack
as he urinates on the faces of two fourteen-year-old girls
after anal intercourse he spills his semen
into their mouths like a rupturing volcano
and then lovingly he begs each girl to swallow
he drives the girls back
to an undisclosed location
near a bus stop or a shopping mall
where he offers each
two hundred dollars in five dollar bills
tickets to his concert
and a backstage pass

the woman on the bus behind me
peers over my shoulder to read the article
out loud
“humph!” she sighs,
“that’s a damn shame
railroading that young brother
we black women always airing our dirty laundry
we got to raise our daughters better than that
at my church
we sing that boy’s song during communion
last sunday after the first refrain
bout three sinners converted
so don’t tell me
he ain’t been touched by god
that boy got to have some good in him
everybody got some inkling of good
by the way you ever really listened to his lyrics
you ever really looked at a fourteen- year-old’s body
they so overdeveloped these days
got fuller figures than most women my age

he just a man and we all know
the nature of men
remember jim baker
clinton
woody allen
remember sodom and gomorrah
remember lot and his daughters
so what if he did what they claim
them reports don't mean nothing
every saint know what it feels like to be a sinner"

Tam Nguyen: An Immigrant Woman's Recollections

Owner On Break Store Open In Half Hour

cross street
locking shop door
closing shop for break
my friend marta castro
it is our time
we will sit you know
we will talk
the weather's fine
so we will spend whole day
with pictures from our old countries
still too much family there
too much blood to be removed forever
marta will sip and let me do
what all mother's do well
hang grief out to dry
marta immigrant like me
except she from honduras
she make dresses
for fancy parties
rich white people
come often to buy her long flowing dresses
she even put real flowers
down middle back of dresses
orchids the smell
like baby laughing after mouthful of goat's milk
everyday we take hour break
we talk me mostly
she bring fried plantains
and i fix café sua da
we drink whole pot in thirty minutes
we clear mind
we fuss fuss fuss
neighborhood crazy place to be immigrant
like when high school girls got mad at marta
for having dresses cost six hundred dollar
even on sale black girls have no money to buy
so they throw open coca cola cans in marta store
coca cola waste all over clearance rack
and marts sewing table
marta cry and clean mess and cry she was broken in more places than heart
marta almost close business for good
but i give her advice
she immigrant woman like me
we only want chance to survive
i tell marta to lock door
when she see black girls coming up street
close store at three fifteen when school let out

turn off all lights i say
and reopen two hours later
by that time the black
the african-americans are on their way home
marta business better now no black problems
cause she take advice advice i learn from experience
marta sewing machine can hum out new dress in peace
now white people can buy pretty dresses
taffeta
organza
silk
satin
marta's rainbow gowns brighten store entrance and entire block
my store doing good too
my children are my greatest concern living in new country
i talk to marta
she good at listen
she sit quiet
let me squawk on
my children rob me of kind words most days
worry worry worry
my son most of all
his eye so full of black girl
even in AMERICA
i prisoner to worry
ah the good part is this store pay mortgage
and one day it will make my family rich
like marta customers that kind of rich
rich enough to avoid black problems as fast as you blink eye
today opportunity sweetens my café sua da
it is opportunity i savor slowly and swallow with pride

1

threaten us because of beer
police give us citation because of beer
because black boys go to high school
and should not be drinking beer it's law
and who am i they mother to ask for ID
beers make us good money
second you ask for ID you make no money
i know this neighborhood look around
beer no problem beer is heaven
yesterday for third morning this month
my daughter's cat started hissing so loud
whole house wake up cranky
i find out later when i go to put out bowl of milk
the cat was hissing at hungry baby
some mother buried from sight her child
beneath cartons of dated shrimp fried rice yacamein
bony remains of buffalo wings barbecue ribs
and molded bread

african-americans think our sign
NO BABY DROPPING PLEASE
placed over the dumpster
is how you say off/en/sive
but any mother who puts her baby in garbage
with cord still attached
is no good to society anyway

have you seen frozen baby starring back at you
i have last winter
trust me dead babies bad for business
that was all people around here talk about for days
dead baby and then police
police start driving up and down street
parking in front our store
scaring our regulars

african-americans
they don't like the police officers snooping around
so they go shopping at other stores
for long while afterwards
we make little money
african-americans look at us
like we stuff baby in dumpster
my mind tells me
those babies belong
to some of their school girls
since african-americans have high school nearby
and many pregnant ones
come in here hungry for our combos
foot long hot sausage on French

fries and coke for three dollars fifty cents
they like to drink sodas
at breakfast times
my husband and i smile at them
but mostly we smile
when their money drops into our hands
in few weeks
we'll have enough money saved
to buy ding ho our son a car just for him
my two eldest daughters
kim and minh have one now

here at store nhu and i pretend
not to understand english
so we do not have to talk
to african-americans anymore than to
tell them we are out of tampax or colgate
or which aisle the ramen noodles
or pork and beans are on
or quote price on pampers
sometimes we sell one for a dollar

today angry words came from me
to one boy customer
who tried to change price
not always but it may or may not
have fallen off during kim's or minh's stocking
you never know
i saw one of those black
i mean african-american boys
remove the price
from a 6-pack of milwaukee best
to 6-pack of coors

when i told nhu he ignored it
since we are not supposed to sell them alcohol anyway
so nhu decided to sell all beer one price
filling one barrel at a time mixing cheap beer
with more expensive beer
"it really doesn't matter when throats get dry
they'll drink whatever is cold"
nhu is so wise
we have even mastered
limiting our conversations to *no's* and *yeses*
along with loud gibberish that scares them
but means nothing in vietnamese
and since they know nothing of our language
we can talk about how much
the males would rather buy beer from us
and hang out in front our store
smoking marijuana and roughhousing
than go to school
and more they smoke more they want food
and more they roughhouse
more they want ice-cold beer
they love us for letting them be big men
today i whispered to my husband
how real estate agent was right
about this location
america is truly land full of
how do you say pros/per/i/ty

2

i forgot to take off my six-caret diamond wedding ring before work
i sleep with it at night if i hold it out from under blanket
it looks like fallen star besides
i haven't many places to wear it between here and wholesale store
sometimes i wear it to children's school plays or grade meetings
but i am never to wear it at work
and for such inattentiveness
this morning my husband nhu scolded me
while ringing up a pregnant girl's (breakfast combo)
fried egg bacon, rice over ramen noodles with fruit punch soda for two dollars
something new he put on menu just yesterday in honor
of final mortgage payment

on building next door he bought for our eldest daughters kim and minh
building will be nail salon
and they(kim and minh) are so happy
barely seventeen and businesswomen
already ding ho has set his sights on clothing line
the boys in this area love his dragon art t shirts and jeans
nhu wants him to learn accounting to manage books
and stop learning all that street english
nhu was born in laos
our children have adopted laotian but speak vietnamese as well
the way they teach english in american school has been
not easy on my children but they survive enough
college in america is no longer a dream
i fear at times my ding ho desire to become like them

talking so easy
to blacks about rap music

while they scream loudly in grocery store to ding ho
who sits behind crowded dry goods counter
spraying a design onto black boy's jeans
african-american boys think ding ho japanese
they get mad at ding ho
when he completes a design for them
they refuse to pay him
they say "stupid jap you think you bruce lee
one day we will bomb you out of here"
and ding ho is confused by his friend's choice of words
as if they even understand
cost of war scars separation from home and family
my father die in vietnam war
my two brothers die as soldiers
and my sister die of syphilis
take some american soldiers with her too
war so long ago
we have new life
new stories begin here
you know i walk to ding ho
every time those friends will not pay
i wrap my arms around his neck and lovingly
scold him for being too hungry for acceptance
these people are customers not friends
i make ding ho promise
if african-americans can't pay him
their clothes must go on sale same day agreed
my poor boy explains to them my rule
instead of making them see his ways
he defies the mother who gave him birth
and lowers his prices to whatever black boys
leave in pockets after beer and combos
settle in their stomachs
i show him my disapproval
in how i ring up that elderly black woman
who cannot decide between epton salt or mineral oil
nhu believes lay-away creates too much paperwork
you can either afford something or not he says
ding ho has to learn if he wishes to be his father's successor

3

i knew if ding ho begged nhu long enough
 nhu would give in to ding ho's plan for store of his own
 now after four weeks
 ding ho has corner building
 no more working behind grocery store counter
 now his store next to the girl's salon
 nhu kept building to store boxes
 today ding business man
 ding ho showed me drawings
 he is trying to choose a logo
 he has even decided to sell children's clothing
 i want him to be successful
 but arranging friends with these people could be his downfall
 he is too eager to meet african-americans demands
 i spend all day watching over ding ho
 how gentle he is with that small space as if it were woman
 stroking paint on wall
 waxing floor on his knees
 slowly meeting the curve of each square with a grin
 he winks at outcome and speaks to air
 i overhear him mumble something my worst fear clarissa
 a forbidden love hardest to prune at root
 the black girl clarissa is college student
 who has found her way into my son's heart
 six months i try
 and ignore signs
 maybe ding nice
 to her for business
 but her roots too deep

i have placed cinnamon sticks in ding ho's shop
 it is still empty but the boxes are here to keep it company
 along with the cinnamon the smell will keep it sweet and welcoming
 ding is hopeful that he will be open week from today
 one hundred flyers met eager hands
 ding ho wants me to be happy for him
 and offers me a cup of ca phe phin
 and a bowl of rice dumplings
 i ask him "if i am to never worry about you
 then am i still a mother
 it is part of my job to nurture through worry
 these two motherhood and worry these two are sweethearts
 i worry when i have no worries"
 he laughs we eat and drink
 but worry is never far from my heart
 that i cannot smell its scent clarissa
 through the cinnamon's aroma
 i know she has been here all the while
 in ding ho's mind
 erasing my memories

my daughters come to see me
 just when ding and i were snacking
 they tell me that they want to go to cosmetology school
 ding smiles knowing i am displeased
 so he takes leave back to his unpacking
 it is his goal to have
 bronze dragons crimson fires thirty two t-shirts and jeans finished
 for the big opening
 girl's business has been making so much money
 they have given up hopes of medical school
 instead they want degrees in business
 nhu will voice his displeasure
 i explain to my daughters some day we will own
 a large grocery store or even a warehouse
 this neighborhood is full of dangerous people
 and we must not get comfortable here
 at times it is war zone
 and we are foreigners to rights and wrongs of these people these blacks
 these women i say to my girl's
 those black women whose nails you clean and polish today
 are just paying bills
 your destiny not here
 i have to make them feel foolish enough to forget this
 and not bring such thoughts to their father's ears
 nhu's his scolding would be long and hard
 i made them promise through tears of resentment they will go to medical school
 in exchange for my not telling nhu

4

almost dawn we hear a noise
 in the kitchen of the store
 nhu takes shotgun from under the counter
 and tells me to open the door then move away
 i do and nhu aims gun at ding
 ding ho in embrace with black girl
 her high cheekbones and dark skin
 almost glowing in moonlight's shadow
 "don't shoot it's me and clarissa" ding ho screams
 different she may be not completely lost to the world of her people
 i heard her talk about how she is
 studying to be a social worker
 but her kind of difference
 is not what ding needs
 her skin is all wrong
 she shouldn't try to trap my son
 because her own men are useless
 i am heartbroken by the sight of clarissa
 nhu is worse than angry
 he says to me in private
 "ding ho should be asleep
 he is a business man
 no longer boy"
 why black girl in our shop after closing hours

is no secret love can not hide itself
even in dark room

she tells us she was just leaving
and while ding ho walks her to her car
nhu promises he will talk to ding about black women
how they defile their bodies
how they are temptresses
who see men like him and will want
what we as a family have worked for
the reason we left vietnam
in search of america land of riches untold
nhu will tell him to find a nice vietnamese girl at his school
or perhaps he will tell him
to write home and bring one here as wife that would be most appreciated
he will tell him how these women (black women)
like their men can not be taken seriously
they are incapable of love and hard work
nhu will say to blacks love and hard work are distant cousins
cousins on opposite sides of the world
i will talk to the girl
see to it she never
in ding ho's company again
i will make my words humble

as her money is always appreciated

i will take fears
of black girl clarissa to sleep
i will pray often
my family not be scolded by our ancestors
for forgetting blood of our blood during trung nguyen
before morning rush of black students
with money to melt away
like cotton-candy
we count our blessings
this store
these children
this neighborhood
in that order
we understand now no reward in America
without sacrificial lamb

blues

if I had a nickel
for every one of my blues
I'd be the richest woman
in the graveyard

VITA

Mawiyah Kai EL-Jamah Bomani is a native New Orleanian. Mawiyah's writings have appeared in *The Crab Orchard Review*, Dark Eros, Catch The Fire, Freeform Magazine, Beyond The Frontier, Kente Cloth, Fertile Ground, Family Portraits, *Chicken Bones: A Literary Journal*, Survival Digest Quarterly, From A Bend In The River, The House of Misfit's Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment, and Women's Issues and Feminism in the 21st Century. She is co-writer/director of the play Brown Blood Black Womb. Mawiyah is an educator who currently resides in Shreveport, Louisiana.